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Editor's Note by Martha Nichols

On Creating Your Own Family Portrait

Mark Vonnegut looked smaller than I expected, decked in baggy khakis and a white button-down shirt. But there was the familiar dark gaze of his book photos—and of his famous father's photos—although the passing physical resemblance explains little about their relationship.



In early April, we sat in Vonnegut's office, chatting about the truthfulness of family stories. Babies cried in other exam rooms. He's a longtime pediatrician, and for the past thirteen years, he's run his own practice, MV Pediatrics, in Quincy, Massachusetts, south of Boston.

He's also well aware of how wildly stories told by people in the same family can diverge. Mark Vonnegut's two memoirs—*The Eden Express* (1975) and *Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So* (2010)—detail his own struggles with psychotic episodes and bipolar disease. Mentally falling apart is not easily conveyed in words, and as Vonnegut told me, "I have started to hate the whole term 'memoir.'" When I asked about his references in past interviews to the rambling quality of "inner narration," he nodded.

"I think a lot of people are just confused," he said. "They see their inner narration as being identical to reality."

As a journalist, I don't trust my inner narration or anybody else's, especially when it comes to family stories. Remembering shared family events can be like peering through a kaleidoscope: Twist it, or shift your position, and the bits of colored glass tumble into new patterns.

As for truth, who's twisting the kaleidoscope now? Whenever I read a memoir, I wonder how much is really true. When I'm the one writing about family, the shifting nature of my own perspective is even more troubling. I'm a writer, and I like constructing stories from pretty bits of glass, but the creative conjuring required can also suck me down an autobiographical black hole.

I've played reporter with my elderly relatives—verifying place names, birth dates, and other “facts”—but there are always multiple sides of a story. A few years ago, I jotted down verbatim my Parkinson's-afflicted father's paranoid tales of a kidnapped child trapped in a cave near the farm where he lived as a boy. My brother and I have both researched this online, trying to find out whether a real news event involving a cave and a child had happened in the 1930s. So far, we've turned up nothing.



Yet, despite the slippery facts, I love reading about families—healthy or crazy, happy or unhappy—because the intensity and obtuseness of family bonds is a mystery few of us tire of. The Spring 2014 issue of *Talking Writing* focuses on “Family Stories” to honor that mystery. It showcases the unique ways writers and artists can illuminate the shadowy zones of family existence—even though the light they're shining isn't that of an objective observer.

Sometimes the approach is “memoir,” other times it's “creative nonfiction”—a term I've always bridled at, except in family stories. Whatever the label, it's never simple documentation. For me, it's more like a do-it-yourself family portrait, one in which I compose the main players in my head and get them to stand still for a few seconds. Sometimes, I capture the real expressions beneath the smiles, the hints of tension or pain that I never understood as a child.

TW's Spring 2014 portraits include several grandmother stories. One is fiction: Andrew Lam's “Grandma's Tales.” The other two are memoir: Morgan Baker's “Nobody Argued with Grandma” and Pat Dubrava's “Three Visits to His *Abuelita*.” (Dubrava's piece will appear later in the issue.) Regardless of their genre, they all evoke powerful women through the limited lens of the younger generation. This is the terrain of creative genealogy writing, in which descendants reclaim family history along with imagining what an ancestor thought.

Writers face other challenges in telling nonfiction stories about family members, particularly about children. In “Why I Write About My Family,” Ruth Carmel (a pseudonym) weighs the need to protect the privacy of her autistic son with the emotional solace her writing provides.

In “Adoption and the Real Story,” David Biddle describes getting past his childhood belief that he didn't need to know about his birthparents or racial heritage.

Anh Đào's photographic portraits of Vietnamese adoptees underscore how much family identity can be a creative act of will—just as featured artist Meg Birnbaum's photo series on the Boston order of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence,

a performance troupe of gay activists, offers yet another familial twist.



In writing about family, it's hard to resist the temptation to impose a falsely smooth narrative structure for the sake of a happy ending. An updated version of my 2011 review of Mark Vonnegut's memoirs, in which I examine his subversive take on mental illness recovery stories, will also appear later in the issue, as will my interview with him this April.

When I asked Vonnegut if the parents and children he sees in his pediatric practice tell different stories about the kids' problems, he said, "Of course they do." Moments later, he wrapped his arms around himself, as if he were cradling a child, and described one mother doing just that with her little boy as she complained, "My child can't make friends." Vonnegut mimed lifting up one arm, then the other, as he told me:

And I say, 'Well, if you unwrap your left arm and unwrap your right arm, and let your child off of your lap, your child *could* make friends.' ...The parenting process is you cut the cord. You cut the cord. Then you cut the cord. Then you cut the cord.

Maybe "you cut the cord" to write about family, too—to get enough distance to create your own portrait instead of the smiling faces your loved ones would prefer. In my case, both my parents have died in the last year and a half, and while I'm far from accustomed to this loss, I've begun to feel new freedom in what I can write.

"Do you believe life is random?" I asked Vonnegut at one point.

"What does that mean?" he shot back. Then he worried at the question some more, saying it's better to realize we all come from "countless" genetic and social influences. "The details are random," he said.

But, I asked a few minutes later, "if most people are spending their time telling themselves stories..., how do you get to writing that is truthful?"

"You watch the details," he said.

Then it was my turn to nod. "You watch the details."

"You watch the details," he said.

Of course. *You watch the details.* I don't regret the cautiously observant little girl I was, just as my twelve-year-old boy, an adoptee, is taking notes now. It's been the balm for my anxiety; it's the fuel for my later creative work. The facts are random in anybody's life—be it your country of origin or a genetic quirk that causes bipolar disease or breast

cancer—but when I put my bits of colored glass together, they do make something. A real story.



Art Information

- [Chavez Family Portrait](#): [5] "Los Cordovas, Taos County, New Mexico. Blas Chavez with his wife and child, reading a letter announcing that he has won the second prize in the state stock show for the best ram" by John Collier (1943); courtesy of U.S. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.
- [Williams Family Portrait](#): [6] "Baltimore, Maryland. Sargeant Franklin Williams, home on leave from Army duty, posing for family portrait with his mother and father beside him and his nephew on his lap" by Jack Delano (1942); courtesy of U.S. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.
- ["Family Portrait in Home of Fred Rowe, Farmer near Estherville, Iowa"](#) [7] by Russell Lee (1936); courtesy of U.S. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.
- ["Transforming Again"](#) [8] @ Meg Birnbaum; used by permission.



Martha Nichols is Editor in Chief of *Talking Writing*.

For one of Martha's family stories about her father and his recent death, read ["I Know What Poetry Can Do."](#) [9]

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